

SPEECH

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HON. JAMES SHIELDS, OF MINNESOTA,

ON

THE PACIFIC RAILROAD BILL;

DELIVERED

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES, JANUARY 7, 1859.

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WASHINGTON

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

1891

S P E E C H.

The Senate having resumed the consideration of the bill to authorize the President of the United States to contract for the transportation of the mails, troops, seamen, munitions of war, and all other Government service, by railroad, from the Missouri river to San Francisco, in the State of California—

Mr. SHIELDS said:

Mr. PRESIDENT: The State that I have the honor to represent, in part, takes a deep interest in the Pacific railroad. There is but one opinion amongst our people upon the necessity of railroad communication with the Pacific. Though the youngest State in the Union, Minnesota is not behind the foremost of the oldest in public spirit, and an enlightened sense of public duty. From our geographical position it is quite natural that we should prefer the northern, or what is commonly called Governor Stevens's route. Being the northwestern State of the Confederacy, we are accustomed to regard this road as an object of the very first importance, not only to us, but to the commercial interests of the country. This opinion derives additional force from the conviction, on our part, that the northern route, upon full and fair investigation and trial, will be found to be the cheapest and best of all the contemplated routes to the Pacific. But to prevent misconception, I take occasion to say, that the moment I find that our first choice is not attainable, I am ready and willing to support any just, equal, and feasible project that will promise to accomplish the general object. There are before the Senate at this time what may be called two general projects for railroad communication with the Pacific. The first contemplates one single central road from the borders of Missouri to San Francisco; the

second looks to the construction of three roads—a northern, middle, and southern road.

Mr. IVERSON. Will the Senator from Minnesota allow me to interrupt him for a moment?

Mr. SHIELDS. Certainly.

Mr. IVERSON. I do so for the reason that he is stating what is the proposition before the Senate. I made a motion to recommit this bill to the special committee, with instructions to bring in a proposition for two roads; and the Senator who occupied the chair at that time ruled that to be out of order; but I think he was satisfied subsequently that he was wrong in his decision, and that my motion was the first one in order. That motion, then, is now pending; that is the motion before the Senate; and it opens the whole discussion on every subject connected with this project.

Mr. SHIELDS. I thank the Senator for his information, for I prefer making it a broad, general discussion. I state, then, that there are two general projects before the Senate, and, as it were, before the country: the one is a single central road to the Pacific; the other contemplates three roads: a northern, a middle, and a southern one. If we are to have but one road, it must be, beyond all peradventure, a central road; and, if we cannot get this, then let us have three roads; nothing but one or other of these two projects will satisfy the country.

The bill reported by the committee proposes a single road, commencing on the Missouri river, between the mouths of the Big Sioux and Kansas rivers, and terminating at San Francisco. To this bill there is a palpable, though not incurable, objection. While it fixes the termini with sufficient

accuracy, it leaves the general line of the road wholly undetermined and indefinite. The road, under the provisions of this bill, may be carried in a northern or a southern direction. It may make a deflection in the direction of the British line, or in that of the frontiers of Mexico. Indeed, under certain circumstances, it may be the interest of the contracting party to give it such a deflection, for the purpose of securing valuable lands, as would render it a very inconvenient and insufficient national thoroughfare. I am willing to admit that no bill can be so framed as to locate the line of the road with anything like particularity; but what may be done with great propriety, and what ought to be done, I humbly think, in the present case, is to designate two parallels of latitude within which the road will be bound to cross the summit of the Rocky Mountains.

We know, from careful exploration, that there is more than one practicable pass through the summit divide near the forty-second parallel of latitude. This fact is as well ascertained now as it ever can be by future surveys. Then why not confine the line of the road within, say, the fortieth and forty-third parallels of latitude? This would afford ample room for selection among the different central routes and central passes through the Rocky Mountains, and give an assurance to the country that the road, if constructed at all, would be constructed on the great central line of trade and travel, commencing at New York and terminating at San Francisco.

The Senator from Vermont says, if I understand him aright, that it has been charged upon this bill that it is a project under which somebody is bound to be cheated; and that Senator, who is one of its ablest advocates, while he repels this charge, admits, at the same time, that although nobody is to be cheated, yet it is very likely that some parties may be disappointed by it. For my own part, I cannot rid myself of an instinctive apprehension that, in its present shape, it is likely to eventuate in a way that will disappoint the great body of the American people. But, as I have no wish to cheat, or be cheated; and do not like to disappoint others, or be disappointed myself; as I do not desire to leave the determination of such an important question to the cupidity of a private company, I hope to see this objection removed by an amendment; and then, if we are to have but a single road, this bill may answer that purpose as well as any other. But as several amendments propose a northern, a middle,

and a southern road, I deem it a duty which I owe to my constituents to present a few of the general advantages of the northern line.

I have collected much accurate information on this subject from the reports and public statements of Governor I. I. Stevens, an able and indefatigable engineer, and a man to whom the whole country is indebted for his reliable explorations and researches throughout our northern Territories. From the western borders of the State of Minnesota to the head waters of Puget Sound the distance, by the northern route, is one thousand five hundred and forty-four miles. From Council Bluff to Benicia, by the middle route, it is two thousand and thirty-two miles; and from Fulton to San Francisco, by the southern route, it is two thousand and twenty-four miles. This shows that the northern route is the shortest from the borders of the western States to the Pacific. The Cadotte Pass, through which the northern road is intended to cross the summit of the Rocky Mountains, is five thousand one hundred and ninety-five feet above the level of the sea. The Summit Pass, near the South Pass, on the middle route, is eight thousand three hundred and seventy-three feet; and the Guadalupe Pass on the southern route is five thousand seven hundred and seventeen feet.

Here, again, the advantage, and a very decided one, is on the side of the northern route. From the western borders of Minnesota to the base of the Rocky Mountains, the country is generally, in fact almost entirely, habitable. Nearly the whole of this immense region possesses a rich productive soil, is well watered, and abounds in luxuriant meadows and prairies, over which countless herds of buffalo roam at will, and find food in abundance, both in summer and winter. The late Colonel Benton declared, on one occasion, that the buffalo was an intelligent and sagacious engineer, and that he surpassed our most scientific engineers in the discovery of the best routes. That remarkable man spoke from observation and experience when he ventured to make this assertion. In the natural condition of a country the track of the buffalo is always sure to be the shortest and best route between two distant points. But whatever may be thought of the capacity of the buffalo as an engineer, nature has furnished him with an infallible instinct to select for his pasture a region of country where soil, water, productions, and climate, all combine for the sustenance and support of animal life.

This instinct is so infallible that wherever you find the buffalo you may conclude that the country is habitable. This is what hunters know, but what engineers do not know. The explorations of engineers, and the information of trappers and hunters, who are familiar with the character of this region, confirm this account of its general fertility and habitable character. The country on this route, west of the Rocky Mountains, possesses a rich soil, a mild, healthy climate, and abounds in timber, water, and coal—all indispensable requisites for the construction and operation of railroads.

A summary of the supposed disadvantages of this route includes a long tunnel through a mountain region of five hundred and fifty miles, and the rigor and severity of the climate. By accurate explorations and surveys, it has been ascertained that by deviating about forty miles to the south, this whole difficulty can be obviated, and the necessity for this extra labor avoided, so that there will be less tunneling required on this route than on either of the others; and, as it has the least sum of ascents and descents, and the lowest grades, the cost of construction must be proportionate. With respect to climate, it is a curious, but well-attested fact, that the average cold at Cadotte's Pass, in the forty-seventh degree of latitude, is not as great in winter, owing perhaps to the Pacific winds, as at St. Paul, in Minnesota; and the depth of snow at the same place, even in mid winter, is never known to exceed two feet; and this, like the snow in all northern latitudes, is so dry and light that it can be brushed away like dust or chaff before the wheels of a locomotive. Who does not know that the quantity of snow that falls or lies upon the ground in any particular region depends not so much upon latitude as upon altitude, as well as upon the moisture and dampness of the atmosphere?

This objection on the score of climate cannot be a very formidable one in a country that possesses so much practical experience on this subject. Why, the best constructed, best managed, and greatest number of railroads are to be found, at the present day, in northern climates. The engineers of Canada and New England are not a little amused at such objections. They point to the Grand Trunk, in Canada, and the railroads of New England, as their best refutation. The best railroads of the world are to be found in northern climates and northern countries.

In shortness and cheapness; in the general

habitable character of the country through which it runs; in the abundance of the wood, water, and coal, along the line of the road, the northern route has an incontestable superiority over all other contemplated or possible routes from the Mississippi to the Pacific. In addition to this, the depression in the Rocky Mountains, about the forty-seventh parallel of latitude, is so great that the head waters of the Missouri and Columbia rivers almost interlock. The Missouri is navigable by steamers to Fort Benton. The Columbia, by one of its branches, (the Snake river,) is navigable to the mouth of the Palouse. From Fort Benton to the mouth of the Palouse is only four hundred and fifty miles. Therefore, a railroad four hundred and fifty miles in length will connect the navigable waters of the Atlantic with the navigable waters of the Pacific. This fact alone, if thoroughly appreciated, ought to induce the Government, as a mere question of economy in the transportation of troops and military stores, to construct this connecting link, so as to have an unbroken and uninterrupted chain of communication across the continent. But this fact, which has been so clearly presented by Governor Stevens, has not succeeded in impressing itself with due weight upon the attention of the Government.

There are other facts of striking importance, which I can barely touch upon in this connection, which renders this one of the most remarkable lines of communication in the world. Nature, as if to make North America the cradle of a mighty race, has opened and penetrated the continent to the very center by a chain of immense lakes or inland seas. There is nothing comparable to this remarkable geographical fact, to be found in any other division of the globe. A vessel laden in the London docks will be able, without breaking bulk, to land her cargo on the shore of Lake Superior, in the State of Minnesota. The future commerce of those lakes will some day equal, and more than equal, the commerce of the Mediterranean sea—a sea that washed the shores of the greatest empires of the ancient world, and which contributed more than any other natural cause to the development of their civilization and power. These lakes are destined, in process of time, to exercise a proportionate influence in the development of the New World. On the Pacific we find Puget Sound to be one of the most magnificent harbors on the globe. Here is what Governor Stevens says in relation to it:

“Puget Sound is admitted, by all naval and military gen-

tle men who ever visited its waters, to be the most remarkable road-stead on the shores of any ocean. It has sixteen hundred miles of shore line, and a great number of landlocked, commodious, and defensible harbors. It can be entered by any winds, is scarcely ever obstructed by fog, and is the nearest point to the great ports of Asia of any harbor on our western coast."

When we take into consideration the advantages of these lakes and of Puget Sound, the mineral and lumber wealth of Lake Superior, the mineral wealth of Washington Territory, and the region of Frazer river, and the vast agricultural resources of the intervening country, is it not evident that a railroad connecting

Lake Superior with Puget Sound would be the most important inland communication in the world?

Mr. President, in endeavoring to do justice to the northern route, I have been careful not to disparage any of the others. Why should I? I am prepared to support any proposition which will give equal assistance to all these roads; and, although the amount may be considerable, it is my firm conviction that, before the lapse of ten years, the augmentation in business and general prosperity would indemnify the nation for the expenditure.

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